

Opinion: Time to rethink Homewood's development plans

By Rochelle Nason

Tahoe's West Shore is an icon of California's natural beauty. Emerald Bay is one of the most photographed spots on Earth. The entire stretch of shoreline and forest, from Camp Richardson to Tahoe City, with its lake vistas and abundance of public lands, provides inspiration to millions of visitors as well as to its tiny local population.

Unfortunately, the area suffers from terrible traffic congestion and air pollution. Evidence of the poor decision-making of the past is obvious everywhere: A huge landslide scars Emerald Bay because of road construction. The watershed continues to suffer from past mining practices. Forests and meadows are degraded by logging and grazing. Extensive overdevelopment abounds, even on fragile soils and steep slopes.



Rochelle Nason

Is our society capable of making better decisions today? Some are hailing a proposed expansion of Homewood Mountain Resort as part of the solution to the West Shore's environmental problems. But we at the League to Save Lake Tahoe (known for our motto "Keep Tahoe Blue") believe this proposal must be downsized and improved to protect and enhance the watershed, scenery and other environmental features and to avoid

worsening traffic congestion.

We recognize the challenge facing the developer. When JMA Ventures purchased the property at the height of the real estate boom in 2006, it assumed expensive legal and moral obligations to stop the property from polluting the lake and to reduce wildfire risk. But we are deeply concerned at its proposal for a host of rule changes to squeeze hundreds of condo and hotel rooms into this small community. Further, changing the protective rules at Homewood could lead to similar transformative changes throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin – yet no analysis of such dramatic changes has been done.

The developer argues that, if it must abide by the limits in effect when it purchased the property, it will have to either sell the property or shut down the ski resort and find another use for the land. However, there is no persuasive evidence that a smaller project could not be economically feasible.

A better vision for Lake Tahoe would direct intensive development to sites near transportation hubs, housing and existing infrastructure. We have helped make this model a success on the South Shore. But today, piecemeal planning is resulting in large project proposals that move development from urbanized casino areas to less appropriate areas – a sad step backward in land-use planning.

The League is urging the developer to work with the community, conservation groups and regulators to create a vision for the resort that all can support – one that does not sacrifice long-term conservation for short-term economic benefits.

More fundamentally, we are asking the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency to consider: How much additional development can the West Shore of Lake Tahoe sustain? What development rules should apply to the basin as a whole? What is the big-picture plan to save the lake? We owe it to future generations to plan carefully to keep Tahoe blue.

Rochelle Nason is the executive director of the League to Save Lake Tahoe.